



State launches electronic campaign finance system

By Ken Dixon STAFF WRITER

Article Last Updated: 01/04/2008 04:21:33 AM EST

HARTFORD -- State officials opened a new campaign-finance filing system Thursday, and political watchdogs said Connecticut will become a national leader in public oversight of the fundraising process.

More than two years after the legislature adopted landmark campaign-finance reforms, the new electronic Campaign Reporting and Information System -- eCRIS -- is expected to make it easier for political campaigns to submit fundraising reports.

Consequently, voters should be able to review individual campaign filings, whether for a local member of the General Assembly or a candidate for governor, through the new Web site, which will be maintained by the state Elections Enforcement Commission.

By April, the public should be able to scrutinize where their local candidates for state representative and state senator are collecting their financial support for the November elections. Until then, campaign treasurers will file their finance information on the eCRIS site.

"Today marks a milestone in the state's history of campaign-finance reform," said Jeffrey B. Garfield, executive director of the SEEC. "Today we together blaze a new path for increased transparency in the financing of political campaigns in Connecticut."

During a three-hour session attended by dozens of politicians and finance directors, Rep. Christopher L. Caruso, D-Bridgeport, co-chairman of the reform-minded Government Administration and Elections Committee, said the eCRIS system will lead the nation as a transparency tool.

"We are the first state in the nation where our legislature has voluntarily enacted campaign-finance reform coupled with public financing," said Caruso, who led the multi-year reform effort.

"We are a model to the nation," he said. "Today we all take an historic step in the right direction to curb the influence of special interests in our electoral process, in our processing of legislation, and more importantly we set a tone for the future of this state that now candidates can go out and campaign on issues."

Sen. Gayle S. Slossberg, D-Milford, co-chairwoman of the GAE Committee, said removing special interests from the political process is the major goal.

"Since the beginning of time, when you have politics there is a discussion of money," Slossberg said.



Slossberg said the extensive, complicated 2005 law was a big step toward diminishing the importance of the sources of campaign funding, while making a usable computer reporting system paramount for candidates and the public.

"We need to know where the monies come from and where the money's going," Slossberg said.

Rep. John W. Hetherington, R-New Canaan, ranking member of the GAE Committee, said his re-election treasurer has used the filing system and praised it for its quick response.

"Sunshine is still the best disinfectant," he said, adding that the public financing component is also crucial.

The 2005 law banned lobbyists and state contractors from contributing to legislative and statewide campaigns. But the law is being challenged in federal court, because lobbyists claim it violates their freedom of speech.

The lawsuit also includes a dispute on the way financing would be available to minor-party candidates.

Andy Sauer, executive director of Connecticut Common Cause, a nonprofit agency that scrutinizes the political process, said Wednesday the new system fixes the problems that plagued the prior electronic reporting site maintained by the Secretary of the State.

"For years, Connecticut has received nearly

failing grades for its campaign-finance information system" from the nonprofit Campaign Disclosure Project, Sauer said.

"Having a functional and stable digital campaign-finance reporting system benefits everyone in Connecticut," he said. "Media and other watchful members of the public will have timely access."

"The computerization that the SEEC presented today is a significant step forward from the earlier system," Tom Swan, executive director of the Connecticut Citizens Action Group, said Thursday in a phone interview. "As an advocate trying to research who's getting money from where, or reporters trying to figure out where candidates get their money, it's a major improvement."

This year most candidates for 187 General Assembly seats -- 151 in the House and 36 in the Senate -- are expected to use public financing.

They will be eligible for tens of thousands of dollars in taxpayer-paid financing after reaching thresholds from smaller contributions ranging from \$5 to \$100.

ä

The Campaign Reporting Information System can be found on the SEEC Web site at www.ct.gov/seec/